

Historicising Sanskrit

Engaging with Sheldon Pollock's Legacy

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This is a book that emerged out of a 2009 conference in Columbia University in honour of Sheldon Pollock, perhaps, the most influential North American Sanskritist today. It is unfortunate that it has taken so long for the South Asian edition (the Association for Asian Studies published an edition in 2011) for this is the sort of book that makes one feel immensely learned after reading, in the latest Sanskrit, and to a smaller extent in regional/vernacular, scholarship. The book raises many questions and does take a long time to read and absorb. It is thus tough to do justice to so many distinguished scholars. Such broad-ranging themes of South Asian civilisation and thought should ideally be debated extensively in India, where the challenges of a contemporary, thoughtfully objective and consistent quality scholarship still seem largely elusive.

The volume does justice to the range of Pollock's interests and mode of intervention. Broadly speaking, as Nicholas Dirks writes in the foreword, Pollock is credited with insisting on describing the materiologies that underpin textual Sanskrit production and interests. In Pollock's legacy, Sanskrit is historicised; contrary to the oft-perceived timelessness of Sanskrit, there are ascents and descents, long and shifting relationships with the "regional" languages. Pollock's legacy also involves an appreciation of differentiated forums like the court, the public inscription (and perhaps more problematically for the legacy, the *mattas*

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(monastic and educational institutions)), and different genres of polity, literature, *shastra* (authoritative norm), etc. Sanskrit, long recalcitrant to cultural history—owing to its vast span of time, space, variety of texts, religious authority, loss of key manuscripts, unedited state of many other manuscripts, difficulty of language, etc—is now biographised, and refined to more amenable morsels of textual clusters and historical ebb and flow.

The book is divided into five parts—the first on the *Ramayana* and its readers, the second on *kavya* (poetry) and its consumption, the third on the vernacular and the "cosmopolitan," the fourth on the *shastra* (and the claims and modes of shastric authority), and the fifth on early modernity, that is, roughly the years from 1000 CE to the present, after mediating the arrival of powerful ideas and armies from Western Europe.

Between Context and Embodiment

In the first essay, Ajay Rao critiques Pollock's formulation of the rise of the Rama deity, by saying that the rise referred less to conflict with Islam (as Pollock had once claimed), and more to the rise of Sri Vaishnavism at the expense of Saiva belief. This initial essay captures some of the difficulties with both Pollock and his interlocutors: an

excessive reliance on explanations through patronage and social context tends to underplay the role of working out of embodied ideas and thinkers.

One would like to know what specifically in the figure of Rama/*Ramayana* narratives helped mediate conflicting world views, be they Sri Vaishnava, Islamic or Saivite. One would have preferred a detailed reading of the extant texts (be they narrative, or ritual) to see the figuration of Rama as a cross-fertilisation of theology with theories of moral kingship. We are simply told of the complex Sri Vaishnava hermeneutic project that "sought to transform the *Ramayana* into a soteriological work," without much explanation thereof. In Yigal Bronner's more literarily attentive essay, we seem on the hint of the rich project yet again: of a detailed reading or an exploration of cross-fertilisation. However, here too, we are left with wanting to know much more about the exact import, mechanisms and significance of the allegedly key Sri Vaishnava theory of *prapatti* (total surrender). Many interesting claims seem to be left as they are, on the verge of the more interesting disclosures.

In the second section which is on *kavya*, Xi He discusses the *Lalitavistara* and the importance of this Buddhist text for poets like Bana, especially in the fascinating use of extended and multistorey metaphors. Here again, He, quoting and following Pollock, stops at exactly the same tantalising point—the intersection of this prose with "religion"—religion (including Buddhism) being a sort of unconscious in the book, and thus relatively under-theorised. Jesse Knutson, reading the *Gita Govinda*, likewise asks of this "theologisation of aesthetics or aestheticisation of theology." The problem of under-theorising religion recurs in Allison Busch, writing on early Hindi.

Sudipta Kaviraj does begin by asking more expansive questions of the *Mahabharata*, and makes the important call for a more reader-centric interpretation. His article may be best linked to Dan Arnold's as they are both theoretically flexible and open about the kind of questions, including contemporary ones, to be asked of the tradition (though Arnold's is in a different section, one on shastra).

Aesthetic Evolution

In the third section, titled "Vernacular and the Cosmopolitan," Blake Wentworth talks of the gradations required not only when one talks of Tamil exceptionalism, but also insofar as the recalcitrant case of Tamil intersects with other "minority" discourses such as Saivite and Jaina traditions. Cox's fine essay attempts to excavate, in detail, the circulatory and institutional sites as ideas travel from Kashmir to the south. Again, he may be best paired with Guy Leavitt (though Leavitt falls under the shastra section), as Leavitt too performs an accomplished and detailed discussion of aesthetic evolution with regard to the Kashmiri aesthetic tradition.

Leavitt argues, contra Pollock, that the social in Kashmiri aesthetics was not quite superseded by the phenomenological. Yet, as Leavitt tells us of these texts, gods, kings, demons, etc. are typified, and these socially typologised entities experience correlatively typologised and appropriate affects such as heroism, fearlessness, the erotic (for example, kings are to be always good, demons always bad). This is almost the opposite of the category of the social in the modern polysemic sense of difference, agency, indeterminacy. For example, today, it would be tough to understand kingship (or any centralised type of sovereignty) without instantly bringing up questions of legitimacy, scope, and process.

The fifth and last part has four articles on early modernity. Parimal Patil makes the important point that energetic strands of Sanskrit thought—especially in philosophy/theology—were alive well into the 1900s, even if only in limited forums and familiar idioms. The task of mediating these almost contemporary texts with other current world traditions

and events remains an unfinished but necessary business.

Ethan Kroll, writing on 17th and 18th century law texts, taps into what is perhaps the richest vein of thinking the normative and the social together. His is a clear, synthetic, illuminating overview of many key concepts around inheritance, ritual and mundane obligation, incapacity, consent, criminal culpability, etc. According to him, law in the 17th and 18th centuries used the *navya nyaya* or "new logic." Property and religion are richly intertwined in Kroll's article to provide a satisfying epistemic picture of the complexity at stake. The following essay by Ananya Vajpeyi asks the key question of the evolving status of the Shudra (as exception, as sufferer, as animality, as one who deceives for the sake of knowledge, etc) in late medieval legal texts, especially as the texts interpret an older Upanishadic text. Vajpeyi ends with the evocative claim that the Shudra is forced to hide his "self" (his identity as Shudra) to gain the ultimate "Self" (knowledge).

Injunction to Historicise

The great gains and insights as well as limitations of Pollock remain in this volume: Is the idea of the "cosmopolitan" simply another ruse for the universalist claims of dominant-caste Sanskrit? The word "vernacular" which is used in Pollock's words is hardly used for the regional languages in India in general. Among other things, it has the unfortunate Greek connotation of "slave." The regional, used more commonly for Indian languages, does not have that history. The idea of the vernacular homogenises; at most the relation of the cosmopolitan to one vernacular is studied, obscuring the relation of the vernaculars to each other, which may or may not be mediated by the cosmopolitan. Moreover, it overlooks the great differences between the vernaculars, in terms of antiquity, demographics, genre, size, dominance, etc.

How really may the conceptual history of Hindi or Farsi (very informatively probed by Allison Busch and Rajeev Kinra respectively) speak, methodologically or thematically to the history of other South Asian languages, some near, some farther—say, Kannada or Bengali? This

is not a matter of a simple addition of language-histories, but calls for a more dynamic theorising of literary-becoming, that is, to try and capture literary trajectories as they emerge instead of doing it post facto: as if they were fated. Perhaps, the present book may serve as an initial and helpful scaffolding for such theorisation.

Perhaps, the triumph of Pollock—the injunction to historicise—has been too great. All the scholars here have shown great care in putting together every hard-won documentary (be it historical or textual) detail, one after another, to paint as best as one could an outline of the intellectual life of the period/genre they are exploring.

There is much to learn from every article. But one does, and more than occasionally, wish—not a return to the older Indology—but a forging of a more imaginative hermeneutic that pays inventive attention to more subject-centric, narrative (Lawrence McCrea and Leavitt lightly touch on this), gender, embodiment, and soteriological concerns.

Lastly, and if it is not entirely a non sequitur, one may notice that out of the 17 contributors, only one is institutionally located in India. This is clearly unfortunate and should be unacceptable to all stakeholders seriously invested in such a venture, and can only be to the detriment of the field as a whole insofar as there is a claim that engaging with the premodern is still a live, wide-ranging intellectual and moral project in the present.

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